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Review of *Strangers and Pilgrims: How Mennonites Are Changing Landscapes in Latin America*. (Vol. 2)—Kennert Giesbrecht

Kerry Fast

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By Kerry Fast
Independent scholar

Strangers and Pilgrims is first and foremost a photo documentation of colony life of Low German-speaking Mennonites in Latin America with accompanying commentary. With volumes published in German and English, *Strangers and Pilgrim's* main audience is Low German-speaking Mennonites in Latin America and their diaspora communities in Canada and the United States. It is patterned after its bilingual forbearer *Gäste und Fremdlinge/Strangers and Pilgrims* (1987), also published by *Die Mennonitische Post*, yet it has some marked differences. Volume I was almost entirely photographs with captions, whereas Volume II includes considerable amounts of text. Volume I focused on the history of colonies and Mennonite settlements in Latin America, and *Strangers and Pilgrims*, in Giesbrecht's words, "provides insight into life in the newer colonies" (p. 5).

The Mennonites who are featured in *Strangers and Pilgrims* are the descendants of the 19,000 Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan who migrated to Mexico and Paraguay beginning in 1922. Most were Old Colony Mennonites, but there were also significant numbers of Sommerfelder Mennonites. In the 1940s and 50s, Kleine Gemeinde and Chortitzer Mennonites joined the earlier immigrants in Mexico and Paraguay.

Chronicling life in 160 colonies is a monumental task. Giesbrecht, as editor of *Die Mennonitische Post*, was able to do this because he travels regularly to Latin America to meet with *Die Post's* readership and is seemingly welcomed onto every colony he visits. The book is organized geographically: a chapter for each country where Mennonites have established colonies. These are framed by an introductory chapter on the 500-year history of Mennonites (beginning with Menno Simons and concluding with the 1920s migration to Mexico) and a concluding chapter of essays on broader themes relevant to Mennonites in Latin America (e.g., "'Queso Menonita' [Mennonite

Cheese]: One Recipe for all the Colonies" and "What Others Write and Say about Mennonites"). Interspersed in the book are short real-life stories of individual Mennonites, ranging from a child's recollection of moving from one country to another, to a young man's experience of being taken hostage, to a family's and colony's devastation by Hurricane Isidore. The photographs document the richness of daily colony life, and the accompanying text addresses the history of Mennonite migration to the country, histories of individual colonies, issues facing colonies, regional variations, agriculture and business on colonies, and family life, among other topics.

Strangers and Pilgrims is an unapologetic celebration of Low German culture and life in Latin America—a clear message to Low German-speaking Mennonites that their communities are life-giving, both in sustaining themselves and contributing to the countries in which they live. While this may not satisfy scholars who are looking for a more critical assessment of colony life, its genius is that it normalizes colony life—I suspect colony Mennonites in Latin America see themselves on these pages. This is a welcome change from the harsh criticism of previous generations of scholars and current evangelical missionaries, and the odd, and often uninformed, mix of criticism and romanticism that media portrayals offer.

Strangers and Pilgrims has come on the scene at a fortuitous time. 2022 will mark the 100th anniversary of Mennonites in Latin America, and it is worthwhile to examine the history of these Mennonites. In the late 1950s, the newly published *Mennonite Encyclopedia* included several articles about Mennonites in Latin America. These were among the earliest attempts to systematically describe Mennonite life in Latin America. When placed on a trajectory with these articles and *Gäste und Fremdlinge*, the value of *Strangers and Pilgrims* becomes apparent as an indicator of Low German-speaking Mennonites in Latin America. What is striking about the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* articles, in hindsight, is how easy it was to categorize and quantify Latin American Mennonites in the 1950s (or so it seemed). Those articles documented seven colonies in Mexico and seven in Paraguay, and a short article, listed three in British Honduras (now Belize) that had been founded in the previous year by migrants from Mexico. In total, there were approximately 20,000

Mennonites in Mexico, 13,000 in Paraguay and 1,600 in British Honduras. *Gäste und Fremdlinge* showed the considerable changes that had taken place in the 30 years since the publishing of the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*. The number of colonies had more than doubled (Mexico–17, Paraguay–20, Belize–5) and Mennonites had moved into Bolivia (Bolivia–16). The estimated total population in 1987 was 87,000. *Strangers and Pilgrims*, written 60 years later, offers a vastly different picture of Mennonite colonies in Latin America: Mexico–49, Paraguay–15, Belize–11, Bolivia–75, Argentina–5, and Brazil, Colombia and Peru all have at least one settlement/colony. Giesbrecht does not even venture to give population figures. Not only has the number of colony Mennonites in Latin America grown dramatically, Mennonites have established themselves in five countries and efforts are underway to expand that to eight. Additionally, *Strangers and Pilgrims* contains maps of colonies in some countries or regions, though unfortunately, not all. These too help to show how Mennonites have spread throughout Latin America. *Strangers and Pilgrims* also documents the proliferation of Mennonite affiliations from the four groups that originally moved to Mexico and Paraguay. Some have modernized culturally and religiously while others retain a marked preference for anti-modern life.

While there are many important pieces of information about the spread of Mennonites throughout Latin America, of special interest, and indicative of the ongoing reality of migration among Low German-speaking Mennonites, is the Nuevo Ideal, Durango colony “tree” that Giesbrecht describes in detail. Nuevo Ideal was settled in 1924 by Old Colony Mennonites from Saskatchewan. Not only does this colony have daughter colonies, but ‘granddaughter’ and “great-granddaughter” colonies. In total, 13 colonies have been founded by descendants of the original migrants to Nuevo Ideal. These are located in several regions in Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina. Giesbrecht writes, “The history of Nuevo Ideal is ideally suited, like none other, to serve as an example of the complexity of Mennonite migration” (p. 76).

Not only does *Strangers and Pilgrims* offer scholars a unique historical picture of the changing face of Mennonite colony life in Latin America, it also offers tantalizing invitations to examine several issues of import:

- *Mennonites and the environment:* *Strangers and Pilgrims* references drastically reduced water table levels in Chihuahua, Mexico, where Mennonites have farmed for 100 years; clearing of forests in Bolivia; stringent laws of what can and cannot be cleared in Peru; and colonies in Belize that are committed to small-scale agriculture without the use of motorized equipment.
- *Mennonite–Indigenous relations:* In Paraguay, Mennonites have established extensive aid and evangelism programs for indigenous neighbors. In Mexico, several colonies have been involved in land disputes with indigenous groups.
- As a religionist, of particular interest to me is the *proliferation of religious affiliation*: In Bolivia, where North American evangelical Mennonite missionary activity is focused, evangelical-minded colony Mennonites are establishing settlements apart from colonies because of the tensions created by their conversions. In Belize, several colonies have created their own form of anti-modernism, drawing on Kleine Gemeinde, Amish, and Old Colony practices.

Strangers and Pilgrims does not address these matters directly, but reports on them, as Giesbrecht’s intention is to *not* stir up controversy. But they are matters that deeply and profoundly affect colony life for the 100,000+ colony Mennonites in Latin America. But what *Strangers and Pilgrims* does offer scholars who are interested in these or other matters is that Mennonites in Latin America cannot be easily categorized, that their social, religious, and family lives are varied and complex and that their political and natural environments fundamentally shape who they are.

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